DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 054 489 CG 006 620

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TITLE Labor Market Experience of Minority Youth in Poverty Neighborhoods.

INSTITUTION Department of Labor, Washington, D.C.

PUB DATE 7 Apr 71

NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at American Personnel and Guidance Association convention, Atlantic City, N. J., April 4-8, 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29

DESCRIPTORS *Depressed Areas (Geographic); Disadvantaged Environment; Disadvantaged Groups; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Economic Disadvantagement; *Labor Market; *Social Discrimination; Subemployment; Underemployed; Unemployment; Youth

ABSTRACT

The numbers, family status, educational disadvantages, homelife, income, and employment experience of minority youth, primarily blacks, are discussed, utilizing much supportive statistical data. After presenting the general picture, the author narrows his focus to the specific skill and training needs and deficits of minority youth from slum and poverty neighborhoods. Some of the findings of a 6-city Bureau of Labor Statistics Urban Employment Survey are elaborated, which describe the job situation for youth and other poverty residents. The results show clearly the economic and social consequences of many years of neglect and discrimination, and the poverty and underemployment that are caused by lack of skill, training, education, and counseling. The author concludes that these advantages while not a panacea, can be the key to a more satisfying life for minority youth. (TL)

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LABOR MARKET EXPERIENCE OF MINORITY YOUTH IN POVERTY NEIGHBORHOODS

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April 7, 1971

By virtually any measure of economic well-being, Negro workers fare worse than their white counterparts. Although some Negroes have been able to break out of the ring of poverty, insecurity and unskilled and dead end jobs, many still remain in the Nation's slums and ghettos, unable to partake of the general affluence of the society as a whole. Even more important, in these poverty neighborhoods many minority youth have given clear and unfortunate indications that their future holds very little hope for them to break out of this ring of poverty.

It is this group of minority youth in poverty neighborhoods--mostly Negro--that I would like to discuss this afternoon. But first, let me set the stage a bit by describing the characteristic situation in which these minority youth live--their numbers, family status, homelife, income, and employment experience.

Minority youth make up an extremely large segment of the population. More than half of the total Negro population is comprised of children and youth, and minority races account for a greater proportion of the young than of any other age group. About 1 in 7 of all people under 25 is a member of a minority race as compared to 1 in 10 of the group over 25.

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The location of minority youth also plays a role in determining their economic situation. Despite the changes over the past decade, Negroes still reside disproportionately in the South--nearly half of the Negro population. And when they leave the South, they are segregated within a relatively few large cities, competing intensively with large numbers of similarly situated youth for jobs and services.

Straight population figures, however, do not really describe the living conditions and the home life of minority children and youth. It is well known that the physical and other conditions of home life of minority children and youth are not as pleasant as for the white majority. Furthermore, a large proportion of Negro children do not live with both parents. Nonwhite children were four times as likely to live with neither parent. Furthermore, minority group children were much more likely to have a working mother, since they have a higher incidence of female family heads and of lower family incomes.

Another disadvantage for many Negro youth is the fact that their family head is likely to have low educational attainment, even in the case of the child living with both parents. They are also more likely to be living in a substandard housing unit, one that does not meet quality criteria of structural soundness and plumbing facilities. As with houses, so with cars; the Negro household is less than half as likely than whites to have recently bought a new or used auto.

Whether viewed as the cause or the effect of these problems, Negro poverty still remains pervasive, even though the gap between black and white families has narrowed in recent years, especially outside the South.

And, some progress has been made in the battle against poverty. Between 1959 and 1969 the number of family members under 18 living in poverty fell from 5.8 million to 4 million, a drop of nearly one-third. In 1959, one-fifth of the white children and two-thirds of the Negro children were living in poverty. By 1969, the figures had been cut by half--to 10 percent of the white children and 38 percent of the minority youth.

Education, of course, continues to be one of the more critical problems for minority youth. While improvements have been made in bringing the education level of Negroes up to that of whites, there continues to be a gap. In the 16-17 age group, Negroes were almost one-and-a-half times as likely to have dropped out of school as their white counterparts. For 18-21 year olds, the likelihood was 2 to 1. It goes without saying, of course, that enrollment and dropout rates alone are misleading, for they do not indicate the quality of the education that is provided to Negro youth. It has been shown countless times that there is a gap in the quality of education being provided to Negro and white youth.

Above all other things, however, the labor market experience of Negro youth provides the clearest illustration of the problems that beset young Negroes.

First in importance is the work status of black youth who have most recently left school and entered the labor market. In general, the occupational opportunities for these youth are poor, whether for high school graduates or for dropouts. Without viable skills to offer, most of these youth can find only low-skilled operative, farm and laborer positions; only a handful find their way into professional, technical,

clerical and sales fields. For example, among black males, only 1 in 3 of the graduates and 1 in 6 of the dropouts were able to find white collar or craftsmen jobs. And this includes the most unskilled and menial jobs in these fields. Over two-thirds of the graduates and nearly 90 percent of the dropouts were employed in the relatively low skilled, operative, laborer, and service worker categories.

Furthermore, a large number of young people just out of school are able to secure only part-time employment, which is a direct reflection of their lack of skills and saleability in the job market. In the past few years, nearly one out of 10 teenage full-time job seekers were working part time for economic reasons, more than 3 times the rate for persons aged 20 and over.

But those youth with jobs--even low skilled, part-time jobs--are often the lucky ones, for they at least have work and a source of income. Many others are much less fortunate, as attested to by the very high unemployment rates among youth. In 1970, the unemployment rate for black youth 16-21 years old, was 25 percent, or one out of every four youth seeking work. The jobless rate of teenagers was even higher--29 percent.

For many of these unemployed youth, lack of a job means merely doing without extra pocket money. But for some it means a vital income loss to their families or even dropping out of school. In any case, a saleable skill would obviously provide them with a better change at more productive employment.

Although these high unemployment rates include the youngster still in school seeking a part-time job and the youngster looking for temporary work during the summer, the situation is not appreciably

better for youth who have left school to seek permanent work, either as graduates or as dropouts. Of the approximately 1,000,000 new graduates seeking work in October 1969, nearly 1 out of five were unemployed at that time. For those who had dropped out of school, nearly one out of four was jobless. Since economic conditions have deteriorated since that time, the problems faced by youngsters who have only minimal occupational skills to offer when they leave school have undoubtedly worsened.

The difficulties that I have enumerated for Negro youth nationally surely indicate the need for training and counseling young people to move them into more useful and more productive jobs. But it is in the slums and poverty neighborhoods of our large cities that the result of lack of skill and training becomes even more stark and takes on the dimensions of an American tragedy.

To explore the magnitude of the employment problems that specifically exist in our slums, the Bureau of Labor Statistics recently developed the Urban Employment Survey, a data collection program established to examine the employment situation and barriers to employment of slum area residents of Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, and New York City. The results of the survey have shown all too clearly the economic and social consequences of many years of neglect and discrimination, and the poverty and under-employment that are caused by lack of skill, education, training, and counseling. Let me describe the job situation for youth and other poverty residents as uncovered by this survey.

First, the BLS survey showed that workers in these poverty areas--who are largely black--had not completed as much schooling as their counterparts in the Nation as a whole. Poverty area workers 18 years and over averaged 10.8 years of school completed, compared with an average of well over 12 years for all the Nation's workers. Furthermore, only two-fifths of the workers in these areas had completed 4 years of high school or more, compared to three-fifths of the workers in the Nation as a whole. These gaps in years, of course, cannot take into account the quality of the education in slum areas, which, as I remarked earlier, is generally accepted as being inferior.

When we look at the jobs that youth from these areas hold, we see that low-status, low-paying jobs represent the primary means of livelihood for young workers. Poverty area youth are especially concentrated in the semi-skilled and unskilled blue-collar jobs, occupations which have exhibited only slow growth in the post-World War II period and which are characterized by relatively high unemployment and cyclical instability. Youth from poverty neighborhoods also have a disproportionate share of the service jobs. Although service occupations have undergone rapid growth in the past 20 years, many of the slum area youth still remain employed in the lowest status, lowest-paying service jobs. Furthermore, only 5 percent of the poverty area youth held the low-unemployment, high growth professional, technical and managerial jobs.

Again, those with jobs may be the lucky ones. In general, jobless rates for youth in these slum areas were 2 to 3 times as high as teenage rates in the United States as a whole. Nearly one in three

youth in the UES slum areas was unemployed at the time the survey was taken--the July 1969-June 1970 period--a time when unemployment had not yet risen to current levels. In one city's poverty area--Los Angeles--40 percent of the Negro youth were unemployed.

Another measure of the employment problems of youth in slum areas is their sporadic work experience during the year. More than half of the slum youth who worked or looked for work were unemployed at some time during the year, a far larger proportion than in the Nation as a whole.

But, high as these jobless rates are, they do not tell the full story, for they reflect only the job problems of those young people who are actively seeking work. They do not include young workers who, though they may want and need jobs, are not looking for work. Nearly 40 percent of the youth in these areas who were not in the labor force indicated they wanted a job. The numbers of these youth--many of whom had all but given up hope of finding meaningful work--only provide additional evidence of the importance of skills and training to the young.

Earnings levels, of course, provide a simple measure of the economic success that Negro youth have had, as well as indicating what may be ahead for many of the youngsters still in school who do not acquire the necessary training. About half of the young workers in the UES areas reported earning less than $65 a week, about the equivalent of the current Federal minimum wage for a 40-hour week. Median weekly earnings for all youth were less than $70 a week.

Such low individual earnings have an obvious impact on not only the attitude towards work of the youth, but also affect the family income in slum areas. As a result, a disproportionate number of poverty area youth are members of families with very low yearly incomes. About 1 in 6 UES area families with 4 persons or more reported incomes of less than $3,500 during the previous 12 months, about the same as the "poverty level" developed by the Social Security Administration. Thus the fruits of low earnings may affect the entire family.

In pointing out the unenviable economic position in which many of our minority youth find themselves, I hope I have made it clear as to why education, training, and skills are of such vital importance. I hope that I have made it equally clear that our current crop of young people need to enter the job world better prepared than those youth already in the job market. In a society such as ours which recognizes the importance of education, training, and counseling, and has the resources to provide it, we can no longer permit so many of our young people to embark on a lifetime of work without the tools necessary to provide meaningful, self-respecting, and decent paying jobs. Although occupational training and counseling is not the sole answer, for many it can be the key which opens the door to a more satisfying life.